

Archbishop Rowan Williams

**Birmingham**

**081116 Faith Leaders' Address**

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When you come to Birmingham, as when you come to many of the great cities of England, and indeed Wales, I think you're often conscious of a nineteenth and early-twentieth century heritage of civic feeling and civic pride. That's hugely important in giving a feel, a profile, a look to the city. The building in which we're meeting is of course a very good example. And that civic identity, I think, meant the provision of public space for music and art and sport and learning. The libraries, the galleries, the concert halls—whether you're in Leeds, Liverpool, Birmingham, Cardiff—are part of the background. And what seems to me really important about *that*, is that people who thought about cities in those terms, were thinking about citizens in what I'll call a three-dimensional way. And basic to what I want to say is what I'll call 'three dimensional citizenship'. In other words they were looking at citizens not as voters or interest groups, they were looking at citizens as people who needed for their life in the community all sorts of spaces that weren't just functional or problem-solving, but spoke to something deep and something more than just political, in the narrow sense.

Now, I think in the late twentieth century, we rather lost the plot about three-dimensional citizenship. Many of the great civic centres of England were re-developed in insensitive and frankly barbaric ways. The whole notion of investing in public space that had dignity and excitement about it, took a bit of a dip in the last quarter of the twentieth century, and it's taken some time to 'push it back in' again. And I say all that because I think that in understanding the role of faith in the city, that's where we ought to start. Faith is crucial to the notion of three-dimensional citizenship. It's saying that people who live in a city are people you may *expect* to have relationships and commitments that have to do with religious

conviction: they are not just about being voters or consumers (or whatever else they may be) but are all of a piece therefore, with that sense of civic excitement and civic pride. And that of course is where we have to say that it's not only in the demise of the public libraries and so forth, that we see a bit of a dip in the late twentieth century.

We're all aware of the way in which national government and sometimes – with respect – local government (doubtless not here) but in some places, has that rather functional and rather limited view of what citizens ought to be or what citizens *are*. And the model that people sometimes work with, is what I occasionally call the 'leave your hat at the door' model: 'You're a person of faith? Alright, we will allow you to join in the discussion of what matters in society, nationally or locally, if you leave your distinctive clothes at the door. *Don't* bring in your convictions! *Don't* bring in the deepest springs of your moral imagination! Leave that outside because it'll only complicate things and you'll start quarrelling if you bring all that inside.'

Well, apart from the fact that people quarrel *anyway*, never mind about religious convictions, this seems to me to balance with a two-dimensional view of the people whose destinies we're trying to understand, in community. It fails to understand that someone's religious faith is not a hobby or leisure activity, but something formative of their vision of what human beings are like. And it's no good saying that you're *faithfully* Asian – *that's* as irrelevant as, say, your membership of the golf club.

Faith is not something you *can* leave at the door. So a good civic life (I'm thinking of cities particularly but it goes for national life too) is one where people are encouraged not to be ashamed of three-dimensionality. Now, that doesn't mean that the common life of the country or the city allows itself to be dominated by any one group or any one confessional or religious community. But it does

mean that you're thinking about what's good for everyone. The good that religious people look for, needs to be taken on board, not as a matter of private preference or eccentric minority taste, but as something deeply formative. And that's where the model that's sometimes marketed of a multicultural or pluralist society can be so confusing. Those words are used in ways that are very often deeply unhelpful and I speak as someone who recognizes fully and gratefully the reality that those words describe, and yet the words are thrown around in thoroughly unhelpful ways.

For some people, living in a pluralist or multiculturalist society is simply living in a context where you recognize that a lot of people have peculiar private habits, including religion. And that's fine. Let them do what they want: you want to go to a mosque, you want to go to a golf club, no problem, we'll let that happen. But what that doesn't allow for, is not only the level of deep motivation I referred to, but the proper exchange and challenge between religious communities. It's important that we ask one another quite tough questions; important to be prepared to give an account of who we are and why; important that that vigorous dialogue – what I once called 'argumentative democracy' - should be encouraged in our common life as part of the three-dimensional.

Now from among many things that have encouraged me in visiting Birmingham this weekend, I'll just mention a couple. First, the work being done on the educational syllabus: there is an approach to religious education which buys into the very emptiest and most boring kind of multiculturalism. 'Let me tell you' says the teacher 'about the funny things lots of strange people do': religion being just an assortment of eccentric behaviours. Many years ago when my wife was working for a publishing firm, she brought home a manuscript of a new religious education textbook, and we turned over the pages together (with eyebrows rising further and further!) waiting for *something* that suggested that this was about conviction, or challenge, as opposed just to *eccentric things people do*. (The section on

Buddhism, for example showed prayer flags. I wouldn't start *there* to explain what mattered to Buddhists! Start with the four known truths and move on, *then* prayer flags might make sense! Start from the inside out.) All of this remains part of an educational philosophy which is external, superficial, and assumes it's not about these deepest places. So, to hear about an approach to religious education, in which you as a group are participating mentally and creatively, in order to challenge some of that 'outside in' superficiality, is very encouraging.

The second thing of course is the experience yesterday morning at the Springfield Centre, which I'll take back with enormous gratitude and delight. I think that what was going on there was a very good example of all sorts of things. It was a good example first, of a community that seemed very much at home with itself: that wasn't nervous or jumpy about its welcoming policy: that was sufficiently at home with itself, to help to make a home for other people too, of all backgrounds. And that's crucial. To engage in this way is not a sign of weakness or fuzzy edges, it's a sign of strength and rootedness. That's important in itself, but also important, if I may say so, is the courageous way in which the city council has been supportive, and has understood that when you see something 'home-grown' that appears to be working, you don't try and replace it with something structured in an office and imposed from the top down. You 'work with the grain', you look at what's happening, what's working and you support it. And as I said at the centre yesterday 'National government, are you listening?' because so often the policies that come from the centre don't seem to be interested in 'working with the grain' as I put it, finding out what's happening and affirming that. There's always an assumption, I find, in office after office in Whitehall that first, there's not very much happening and therefore *they* have to bring the faith communities together: second, because religious communities left to their own devices will kill each other, so government has to step in and 'broker' the relationship. And third, government has to think of things to do that will stop religious people killing each other and 'roll them out'!

Now, at every level there are such major levels of misunderstandings there, it's hard to know where to begin. *That's* why it is such an encouragement to see that 'working with the grain', that recognition that first, there *is* something going on, and second, religious people, left to themselves, actually *don't* kill each other. They get on rather well. And third: the way to do this *constructively* is sensitively, with an awareness of context, respectful of local initiative, and building out of that. And from that come partnerships like the excellent work that's done in Springfield, so I think that that is very good news, and it's part of the way of presenting to society some vision of what this three-dimensionality might look like. Here it seems, is a city that's willing to allow three-dimensional to flourish without too much anxiety and willing to 'work with the grain'. I hope that's true and goes on being even *more* true. But most of all, I hope that the message is *shared*.

If you're up against a government philosophy that is in some of these ways rather 'clunking', occasionally, you need some good stories, you need a good civic story to tell, and it looks as if this is one. And in sharing that local story, you are pushing back at that 'hat at the door' philosophy in the most effective way, and doing your bit for what I call this 'argumentative democracy': democracy in which it's *not* embarrassing or impossible to bring into the public sphere arguments that are related to your religious conviction.

Now, in some of the big public controversies over ethical issues that we've had in the last few years there's been this rather odd thing: 'You're only saying that because you're religious'. So if you're opposed to the *Assisted Dying* Bill, this is a plot by religious people to force their views on everybody else. Well, yes, of course I oppose this Bill because of my religious convictions! *That's why I oppose the Bill*. I do not want to see a society go down that route. I may or may not persuade you of that

during the public debate, but don't tell me to shut up before we even start the argument! That seems to me a way of undermining the three-dimensional quality that I've been trying to get at: as if, left to themselves without religious interference, *everybody* would have the same reasonable view of assisted dying or abortion or whatever! None of us lives in a vacuum and nobody is 'left to themselves', none of us comes without community forming our vision and our morality. And we need to push back a little on that assumption that everybody is *naturally* a reasonable secularist, and it's only religious people who 'mess it up' by introducing all sorts of unnecessarily complicated beliefs and talk about them. So I don't think I'll say very much more, but that's just an outline of where I come from when I try to engage in this discussion about religion in the public sphere. And it's not *just* to do with the pragmatic point, that people get terribly frustrated if they can't bring their deepest convictions into public discussion: it's also something of a theological point which is attempting to say 'Politics is too important to be left to politicians'. Politics *always* needs framing within a three-dimensional picture of what human beings are like. When that is lost sight of, then civic, national and international life dry up. They *don't* become rational, safe and orderly, they become either dull or rather menacing. So, there is, I think, a proper *theological* vision that—as I as a Christian would see it—says, 'wherever you're dealing with human beings – social or individual – you're dealing with them *whole*: you're not able to amputate just the bits you can manage and isolate them from the other bits. Because we are all of us shaped by far more relationships, affiliations, loyalties and visions than can be contained just in a functional, political or economic programme.

So in claiming the freedom to engage this way in the public sphere, we are finally saying something *hugely* important about the *human* self - or what we mean by *humanity* - at a time when there's plenty that's shrinking and trivializing things. So, good luck to Birmingham! And congratulations to them for what's been done so far, and let's see and hear more about it! Thank you.

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